

Duckworth hears about infrastructure issues from Lake County mayors

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Mayors from across Lake County on Tuesday afternoon gathered in North Chicago to tell U.S.

Sen. [Tammy Duckworth](#), D-Ill., about the lack of adequate east-west commuting options in the county, the specter of dirty Lake Michigan water and the cost of checking drinking water in the area for lead, among other infrastructure issues.

The newly elected senator — Duckworth ousted incumbent Republican [Mark Kirk](#) in November — told the mayors she decided to make transportation and infrastructure "one of my significant focus areas" upon her arrival in the upper chamber of Congress.

She added that her membership on three [Senate](#) committees — commerce, science and transportation; environment and public works; and energy and natural resources — positions her well to weigh in on infrastructure bills in the coming months and years.

Duckworth wasted no time getting to work on infrastructure. Last month, the Senate passed a bill Duckworth introduced that reverses a rule that would have required the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning to merge with agencies in Wisconsin and Indiana, according to a news release issued by Duckworth. The rule would have required any federal transportation funding slated for Chicagoland to be approved by the governors of Wisconsin and Indiana, according to the release.

The Senate passed the measure 64 days into Duckworth's term, a span Sen. Dick Durbin, Duckworth's fellow Democrat and senior counterpart from Illinois, called "record time" for a first bill in the news release.

The session on Tuesday, held at North Chicago City Hall, included North Chicago Mayor Leon Rockingham Jr., [Waukegan](#) Mayor Wayne Motley, Waukegan mayor-elect Sam Cunningham, Highland Park Mayor Nancy Rotering, Libertyville Mayor Terry Weppler, Park City Mayor Steve Pannell, Round Lake Beach Mayor Rich Hill and Zion Mayor Al Hill.



Sen. Tammy Duckworth meets mayors from the area in North Chicago on Tuesday, April 11, 2017. (Luke Hammill / Lake County News-Sun)

"This type of dialogue is exactly what our local units of government need," Rockingham said.

Looming large over the conversation was President [Donald Trump](#)'s budget, which Duckworth said would "zero out" funding for TIGER grants, which help fund transportation projects. TIGER stands for Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery.

"We're going to fight and put those back, because TIGER grants are something I think can be very bipartisan," Duckworth said. "It doesn't matter if you're in a red area or a blue area. Everyone needs to fix their roads."

Trump has also proposed a \$1 trillion infrastructure package, but critics have said most of the money would come not from the federal government, but from tax breaks and public-private partnerships. Skeptics have also worried that many tax breaks would go toward projects that would have happened anyway, Politico reported Monday.

Duckworth said there could be a place for tax breaks and public-private partnerships but noted that some projects, such as filling potholes, don't generate a return on investment for the private market and would need to be paid for with traditional federal spending.

"There's always going to be a need for federal financing of infrastructure projects," Duckworth said.

Duckworth noted that there "are bipartisan members of both the House and the Senate who will oppose this budget."

After the session, the senator said Lake County is "unique" because people assume it is "very connected infrastructure-wise" because of its proximity to Chicago.

"But there are some real challenges here," Duckworth said.

Mayors brought up the long-debated Route 53 extension into Lake County, worried about how Trump's cuts to the Environmental Protection Agency would affect the quality of Lake Michigan's water and complained about the

efficiency of the Army Corps of Engineers, an agency involved in projects such as dredging Waukegan Harbor.

"It's almost like the Corps of Engineers is the most conservative and least efficient," Duckworth said, as mayors around the room nodded in agreement.

Weppler had one request for Duckworth: if she makes progress on passing new regulations or requirements that would help cities, he asked her to find federal money to support communities in implementing them.

"We're getting killed with unfunded mandates," Weppler said.

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